

Navigating Religious Coexistence in Sri Lanka: Challenges, Reflections, and Implementation Prospects

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Abstract

Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity make up the complex religious mosaic that makes up Sri Lanka, and throughout its history, there has been peace and strife between different faiths. Through analyzing the data gathered from purposefully sampled interviews and secondary sources, this study explores the myriad issues that impair the harmonious coexistence of religions and provides viable solutions. The challenges include political interventions that exploit religion for electoral gain, the failure to implement constitutional and legal frameworks designed to promote ethnic harmony, the divisive influence of media, poor communication and coordination among stakeholders, an ineffective education system, and the lack of financial resources for meaningful projects. Reforms to education, interreligious dialogue, constitutional safeguards, regulating media, and legal actions are among the suggested remedies. The findings offer practical perceptions and actionable recommendations to enhance religious coexistence and support broader efforts toward peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

Harmoni agama dan etnis di Sri Lanka menghadapi tantangan signifikan, termasuk intervensi politik yang memanfaatkan agama, kerangka hukum yang tidak diterapkan untuk keberagaman etnis, pengaruh media yang memecah belah, komunikasi dan koordinasi yang buruk antar pemangku kepentingan, sistem pendidikan yang tidak efektif, serta kurangnya sumber daya keuangan untuk mendorong inklusivitas. Mengatasi masalah ini memerlukan penghapusan agama dari ranah politik, penegakan ketat terhadap ketentuan hukum dan perlindungan konstitusional, pemantauan media untuk menekan ujaran kebencian, serta pembentukan mekanisme nasional yang terkoordinasi

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untuk mempromosikan keberagaman. Selain itu, sistem pendidikan yang efisien yang menekankan keberagaman dan empati, bersama dengan platform untuk dialog antaragama, dapat menjembatani perbedaan dan membangun saling menghormati. Strategi-strategi ini bertujuan menciptakan budaya keberagaman agama yang berkelanjutan, yang penting bagi stabilitas sosial dan persatuan Sri Lanka.

Keywords: coexistence; minority; pluralism; rights; Sri Lanka

Introduction

Sri Lanka, a country where several faiths, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, have coexisted for generations, is known for its religious diversity (Sachithanantham, 2021). The complex interactions between religious practices have enriched the island's cultural diversity and historical tapestry (Safiullah & Begum, 2018). However, a complex and frequently difficult task is the establishment of religious coexistence.

Sri Lanka has seen both times of peaceful religious coexistence and occasions of conflict and tension throughout its history (Rifai, 2020). Although the coexistence of religious groups has long been a pillar of societal dynamics, it is crucial to acknowledge and solve the issues that have occasionally strained the bonds of cohesion (Vanniasinkam et al., 2018; Ramiah & Fonseka, 2006).

As a result, achieving religious harmony in Sri Lanka requires a thorough understanding of political, socioeconomic, and historical factors. Despite various measures have been taken to ensure religious coexistence through government policies, civil society organizations, and Islamic organizations, there are significant problems in instilling religious coexistence in Sri Lanka (Mujahidin, 2023; Zuhair, 2016). Accordingly, this study aims to clarify the complicated problems that jeopardize religious harmony among different religions within the Sri Lankan context.

The phenomenological method is employed in this qualitative study because it lends itself well to the concurrent employment of multiple research approaches. According to Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022), this method focuses on describing human experiences from the perspective of the person experiencing them. Researchers used various methodologies to understand the topic, including interviews and secondary data analysis. Purposive sampling

was used for this qualitative study, including 10 participants from two prominent Islamic religious organizations, All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) and the National Shura Council (NSC). This approach allowed for a more comprehensive exploration of interfaith dynamics within Sri Lanka. The decision to interview two above Islamic organizations without including representatives of other religions is based on this study's specific goal, which is exploring the Muslim community's role in navigating coexistence within the context of Sri Lanka that may provide unique perspectives to interfaith dynamics. In addition, practical constrictions such as time and resource limitations influenced this decision, allowing for a more thorough exploration of the selected organizations.

Challenges for Coexistence

Political Interventions

Many respondents and researchers found that national political and geopolitical issues shape how people of all religions relate in Sri Lanka. Respondent 6 stated:

“Scenarios that are occurring in implementing coexistence within Sri Lanka are influenced by geopolitical and other considerations. So, we took those considerations into account and managed accordingly.”

In line with this, Saleem (2018) states that from independence, Sri Lanka's Sinhala elite dominated the country, establishing cultural symbols, establishing new cities, suppressing left movements and Tamil national consciousness, and abolishing citizenship rights for Indian-origin workers.

After the 1950s, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism became a powerful political movement in the country. Under the leadership of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike it took an anti-imperialist attitude and vocally promoted indigenous culture, religion, and the people's language (Nuhman, 2016; Sarngadharan, 2023). Since the late 1970s, a variety of extreme Buddhist groups and organizations have emerged, each of which shares a new ideology known as *Jathika Chintanaya*, which means National Thought (Goonewardena, 2020).

Similarly, an offshoot of *Sihala Urumaya*, *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU) is a more active Sinhala Buddhist nationalist movement founded in February 2004 by renowned Buddhist monks with the aim that Sri Lanka is to be a Sinhala Buddhist unitary state governed by Buddhist principles (deVotta, 2016; Nuhman, 2016; Sarngadharan, 2023).

Udagama (2012) mentioned that the ethno-religious identities that formed during colonial authority were further solidified throughout the post-independence period as a method of jockeying for political power and entitlement.

Geopolitical factors, including India's concern over Sri Lanka's potential threat, have led to India preserving power in Sri Lankan politics, resulting in Sri Lanka's inability to make independent decisions and the rise of Buddhist-Muslim extremism. Buddhist extremists have a long relationship with India. Whatever was happening was also connected to India (Respondent 6).

Peiris (2020) mentions a Buddhist monk's statement, which could be concluded that politicians exploit people's feelings and spread misinformation, disrupting community peace and making it challenging for inter-religious committees to intervene.

Most respondents cited political intervention as a significant challenge in promoting religious coexistence in Sri Lanka, as politicians exploit religious differences for power and social disharmony. Furthermore, many interviewees said that Zionism played a big influence in creating social disharmony in Sri Lanka.

Unimplemented Constitutional and Legal Frameworks About Ethnic Harmony

The *Article 29* of the 1948 Soulbury Constitution in post-independent Sri Lanka contained guarantees for the rights of several ethnic and religious groups. *Section (a)* of the *Article 29* states that no law shall prohibit or restrict religious freedom, *29(b)* no shall be restricting the free exercise of any religion or any legislation that discriminate against persons of any community or religion, *29(c)* confer on persons of any community or religion any privilege or advantage which is not conferred on persons of other communities or

religions, 29(d) ensured that law could not interfere with any religious body except with the approval of the governing authority of the body.

However, under the 1972 Republican Constitution, minority communities had no protection of their rights. *Article 9* of the 1978 second republican constitution ensured that Buddhism was given the most important role in Sri Lanka. It meant that the state had to ensure *Buddha Sasana* was protected and fostered while assuring all religions of the rights granted by *Articles 10* and *14(1)(e)* of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. (Parliament Secretariat of Sri Lanka, 2021). Consequently, negative constitutional consequences for religious freedom were brought to bear by both *Article 6* of the 1972 Constitution and *Article 9* of the 1978 Constitution (Peiris, 2020). Meanwhile, *Articles 12* and *14* of the 1978 Constitution provide all citizens the right to religious freedom and not to be discriminated against based on religion (Gunatilleke, 2015).

Similarly, Udagama (2012) insists that *Article 9* of the 1978 Constitution has also had an impact at the policy and institutional level. Successive governments have created ministerial portfolios on religious affairs. There have been specific ministries that have fostered the *Buddha Sasana* and promoted other religions, too. There are also separate government departments that deal with the affairs of the four main religions of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, Sri Lankan authorities made sure to strengthen national unity and reconciliation among all communities through reforms like establishing the ‘Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission’ (LLRC) in 2010 and publishing the National Action Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights (NHRAP) 2011-2016 during the Period of President Mahinda Rajapaksha. Although the NHRAP’s broad scope does not appear to include promises directly related to preventing religious violence, some significant commitments in the NHRAP about religious freedom and certain line ministries have been charged with achieving these obligations. The LLRC was formed to investigate and suggest options for bringing the country together and promoting reconciliation among all populations. The government’s approach to reconciliation includes several measures, which were set out in

the National Action Plan of 2012 and adopted recommendations from the LLRC (Gunatilleke, 2015).

The Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) is a Ministry of Justice agency whose mission is to promote harmony and unity among Sri Lankans while respecting their variety. This organization is committed to fostering a society where everyone respects all people's fundamental rights, freedoms, and equality. ONUR was established in 2015 and chaired by the former president Chandrika Kumaratunga (GIZ, 2021).

Sri Lanka now provides more freedom to follow one's faith. It gives enough protection to all citizens. However, there is an issue with enforcing such regulations and projects across the country, as many studies, including Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights (2024), Centre for Policy Alternatives (2022), U.S. Department of State (2023), Subasinghe et al. (2021), Peiris, (2020), and Schonthal (2016) made this observation and mentioned it in their reports and studies.

Gunatilleke's study (2015) suggests that Sri Lanka's legal framework effectively protects religious freedom and prevents violence, but enforcement remains a major issue, with judicial inaction often contributing to the post-war narrative on religious violence, highlighting the need for improved enforcement.

Media Influence

The media contributes to a country by preparing, forwarding, and managing information sharing among people. As opinion makers and trendsetters with significant influence over people's ideas, choices, and ideologies, the media's role in society may be beneficial and destructive (Peiris, 2020).

The media plays a vital role in determining coexistence among communities in Sri Lanka. Respondent 6 marked:

“Buddhists and Muslims do not have an issue with one another, but media misinformation, geopolitical actions, and worldwide islamophobia are all striving to divide this people for their benefit, who are living peacefully together.”

In Sri Lanka, mass media and social media play an important role in disseminating information to the public (Rathnayake, 2023). Even since Ceylon's (the term for the country is now Sri Lanka) first newspapers appeared, the media showed signs of political bias. The close links between the current dynasty and the main political parties make it obvious that politicians and the media have the same interests. The newer wave of publishers seems to suffer from the same politicized media influence. Newspapers like *Lakbima*, *Ceylon Today*, and *The Nation*, for example, have direct political or financial ties to politicians (Gunatilleke, 2017).

According to Surendranathan (2020), religious violence between Sinhala-Buddhists and Muslims started even after the civil war ended. At the same time, the mainstream media gave little priority to reporting on the violence. Also, a lot of historical incidents spread because of the misleading information provided by the media.

Gunatilleke (2015) provided an example of the media's role in the religious freedom debate, evident in the Aluthgama riots, where mainstream media only reported on the tense situation and later downplayed the incident.

In the same way, social media is helping to grow intolerance and violence toward religion. Social media can be seen as both helpful and harmful. On the one hand, we must acknowledge that hate speech is frequently spread via social media (Pukallus & Arthur, 2024). It could potentially be used to interfere with religious freedom and incite hatred.

Sri Lanka has seen a significant rise in social media and online activism. According to recent estimates, the number of Facebook users, the most popular platform in Sri Lanka, has surpassed 7.6 million. Accounting for more than 38% of the country's population (de Silva et al., 2022). Facebook, in particular, is where most of the hate speech expressed in Sri Lanka is found. Being able to like, share, and comment on messages allows supporters to join discussions, plan rallies, and events, and keep important posts grouped. Violence in Aluthgama in 2014, Gintota in 2017, and Ampara and Digana in 2018 are all evident examples of hate speech and hate violence, politicizing ethnic and religious identities and targeting particularly the

Muslim community (Hattotuwa & Wickremesinhe, 2022; Samaratunge & Hattotuwa, 2014; Search for Common Ground, 2019).

A study by the Minority Rights Group surveyed 103 postings, tweets, and comments from March to June 2020, primarily targeting Muslims. 58% of the posts targeted Muslims or Islam, 30% targeted Christians, and five targeted Tamils or Hinduism. The majority of Sinhala language posts were hostile to Muslims, with 79.2% of the 53 posts being anti-Muslim (MinorMatters, 2020).

However, the Sri Lankan legal system is replete with regulations prohibiting the use of certain sorts of speech that either offend religious sensibilities or encourage communal conflict (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2018). The Penal Code, for example, lists several such offenses: *Section 290*: Injuring or defiling a place of worship to insult any class's religion, *Section 290B*: Acts about houses of worship with the intent to offend any religion, *Disturbing a religious gathering (Section 291)*, *Section 291A*: Using words with the intent to offend religious sensibilities, *Section 291B*: Deliberate and malicious activities designed to incite religious sentiments in any class by denigrating its religion or religious beliefs.

Besides general laws, there are also certain legal statutes addressing certain attacks on religious groups, such as disturbing the peace, violent assaults, making threats, and intimidation. Likewise, certain other Acts have restrictions prohibiting certain sorts of speech injurious to religious freedom (Gunatilleke, 2018). According to *Section 3(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act, No. 56 of 2007*, no one should advertise war or advocate national, racial, or religious hate that constitutes incitement against discrimination, hostility, or violence. The offense falls under the jurisdiction of the High Court, and proceedings containing the offense receive the Court's utmost priority.

The Sri Lankan government has used temporary blocks on many social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Viber, IMO, Snapchat, and Twitter, to prevent the spread of violence in the

past, such as the Digana riots and the Easter Sunday attacks (Amarasingam & Rizwie, 2020). However, the government lacked any method for monitoring social media, and the lack of implementation of such regulations is one of the primary causes of religious conflict in the country, as evidenced by numerous studies (Balendra, 2024; Jayasinha & de Mel, 2021; B. Perera, 2020; Weeraratunge & Dewasiri, 2021).

Lack of Communication and Coordination

Various organizations are attempting to foster religious coexistence in Sri Lanka. Specifically, several civil organizations have been working to promote peace among the ethnicities in the country. In this approach, the Centre for Peace Building and Reconciliation (CPBR) (Peace Insight, 2016) has worked since 2002 to build bridges between Sri Lankans by creating networked peacebuilding groups nationwide. One of the fundamental goals of CPBR is to imagine, create, nurture, sustain, and change human relationships.

The CPBR's 'Interfaith Dialogue' project, implemented through six Interfaith Dialogue Centers in the Eastern, Northern, North Central, Central, and Southern Provinces, aims to bring conflict-divided ethnoreligious groups together through various peacebuilding initiatives. These include dialogues, exposure visits, joint festival celebrations, awareness raising, community development, language learning, and computer training (Peiris, 2020).

One prominent national civil organization, *Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena* or Peace Brigades, also seeks to motivate nonviolence, teach peace activities, and educate people in peace efforts to help integrate all groups of people from different faiths. Since 2000, *Sarvodaya* has joined forces with the United Religions Initiative (URI), to carry out interfaith projects in Sri Lanka. URI is recognized as a rising global community dedicated to fostering long-term, daily interfaith cooperation, putting an end to religiously driven violence, and cultivating cultures of peace, justice, and healing for the Earth and all living beings (Peiris, 2019; Schweitzer, 2012).

The National Peace Council of Sri Lanka was also established in 1995 to partner with different groups to inform, motivate, and support the establishment of a society that seeks a political solution to ethnic problems, promotes

reconciliation, and ensures equal opportunities for everyone. In 2010, the NPC introduced District Inter-religious Committees (DIRCs) that are made up of leaders from all religious backgrounds in the region, along with civil society, media members, youth groups, women's organizations, and officials from the government (The National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, 2021). It promotes living together in harmony among people of all faiths in the country.

Although several civil and religious organizations have been working on coexistence for many years with numerous plans and projects, coexistence remains a source of contention, with many discourses and conflicts occurring. It demonstrates a lack of coordination and mutual support, making it difficult to form a cohesive nation. Respondent 5 mentioned:

“In order to build bridges to work with these organizations, we schedule meetings and discussions with them as a first step. When they discuss their views and choices for collaborating with us to promote religious coexistence among Sri Lanka's various religions and races, however, there are certain barriers to contact with them, particularly to collaborate with them, because some organizations' responses are still pending; most of them are eager to preserve a good relationship, but their executive committee's decision does not favor us in working together on these projects.”

In this regard, *Sarvodaya* stated that the language gap is one of the challenges as Tamils and Sinhalese know little of each other's language and have difficulty in communicating across ethnic groups, and another is that the nature of religious leadership is different for Hindus and Muslims than for Buddhist and Christians, which has created barriers to participation (Johnson, 2006). In recent times, similar concerns have been raised by several studies, such as Dassanayake (2024), Perera and Khodos (2024), Halik and Rifka (2022), and Menik (2016).

Ineffective Education System

Education is the most effective tool in nation-building. “*Education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use to change the world*”, said Nelson Mandela.

Colonial influence in Sri Lanka led to the establishment of customized schools for Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic, and Christian students, contributing to the religious and ethnic disintegration of colonial and post-independence Sri Lankan society (Janíkova, 2018; Vanniasinkam et al., 2018; Wedikandage, 2014).

Sri Lankan schools and curricula lack diverse religious education, as per preliminary findings from the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (OHCHR, 2019). In addition, the history discussed in these schools dealt with conflicts and saw little coexistence among nationalities.

Fernando (2018) adds that racism in the educational system is fueled by radicals and political culture, with many university students and academics being mute or less passionate about anti-minority violence. As a result, the current educational system makes encouraging coexistence from schools onwards very difficult.

Lack of Finance

The UN peacebuilding fund annual report revealed significant funding gaps for the ONUR project, aimed at establishing religious coexistence among minority populations in developing countries, impacting its success despite its expected immediate peacebuilding benefits (UNDP, 2016). Even various civic organizations' projects have been made. These organizations have carried out many projects with the support of United Nations partners, foreign aid, and support from the local community.

Finance is crucial for the implementation of programs by Islamic and civil society organizations in Sri Lanka. However, funding is limited and rare, with only a few domestic and foreign organizations providing funding. Islamic organizations lack access to this funding, affecting the implementation of micro-level projects. In this regard, Respondent 7 explained:

“Every (coexistence) project or program has a financial basis. Sometimes a project is completed once and then we are unable to complete it again due to a lack of funds. Because the NSC receives no funding from outside the country and is entirely reliant on well-wishers, affluent individuals, and a few local organizations, the (COVID 19) pandemic has had an impact.”

In addition, Respondent 9 stated:

“In general, people in the community do not like to sponsor these programs and activities. They have a common perspective that funding for poor people, food distributions, school supplies distribution, and building houses for needy people are merely good deeds, but they do not believe that developing social harmony is a process that is also contained in religious teaching.”

Actionable Steps to Promote Coexistence Culture

To make religious coexistence a reality, the government, officials, policymakers, religious leaders, civil organizations, schoolteachers, and people of all ethnicities must collaborate. Therefore, the authors recommend the following procedures.

Excluding Religion from Politics

In Sri Lanka, the four major religions are Buddhist 70.2%, Hindu 12.6%, Muslim 9.7%, Roman Catholic 6.1%, other Christian 1.3%, and other 0.05%. (The World Factbook, 2023). Since Buddhists comprise most of Sri Lanka's population, Buddhism is a key part of the country and its politics. Also, Buddhist nationalism plays a major role in Sri Lankan politics (Gamage, 2021).

The study reveals that politics and religion are intertwined in Sri Lanka, creating challenges for coexistence. Local and geopolitical factors create more problems, disrupting society and causing more ethnic problems.

Hettiarachichi (2010) suggests that Singapore's policy of separating religion from politics inspires Sri Lanka, aiming to establish rules for peaceful coexistence among various faiths rather than determining their validity.

Singapore's Former Home Affairs Minister, S. Jayakumar, emphasized the legislation's aim to prevent animosity and communal politics, asserting that no single religion can be the dominant or official religion of the state (Thio, 2006).

Promoting religious unity among different races is crucial and can be achieved through parliamentary procedures. Sri Lanka has used religion as a

tool to assist other countries, emphasizing its importance. To restore stability and security, the government and political leaders must rise beyond ethnic and religious politics (Gunaratna, 2018).

Absolute Enforcement of Legal and Constitutional Frameworks

As mentioned, Sri Lanka's constitutions and legal framework safeguard religious freedom and promote coexistence and harmony among all ethnicities in the country, whether minorities or majority. In addition, the government's policy and institutional framework strengthen religious freedom and the concept of religious harmony.

However, the government should form a separate administration committee to supervise and monitor the implementation of written laws and planned frameworks. It should also include representatives from all of Sri Lanka's ethnic groups. This body also draws limits between what is acceptable and what is not in all communities' social and public activities. It may have subcommittees that work with the government to provide resources, proposals, and other services.

Monitoring Media and Enforcement of Law on Hate Speech

The government should emphasize that the media operates according to the principles of ethics and policy. All types of media are covered by legal and ethical rules in Sri Lanka. For example, the code of ethics of the media is that the 'media should not be published if it contains insulting statements about religious groups or communities, or if it promotes communal or religious division, as this may threaten religious and communal harmony' (Ministry of Mass Media and Information of Sri Lanka, 2020).

In general, the media should be an independent and neutral medium. According to Riaz (2017), the main goal of today's media broadcast is to increase audience and ratings, regardless matter how contentious and questionable it is. When ideas are fed instead of facts, the opinions become facts, and a man's normal thinking process is taken away. According to *Meewalwaawe Dhammanda Thero*, the media contributes to problems by sensationalizing stories and failing to fulfill their responsibilities. More

positive and frequent reporting on continuing inter-religious coexistence work to the public is one of the most effective media initiatives (Peiris, 2020).

As reported by the EconomyNext (2021), Sri Lanka plans to form a committee that will look at revising laws and creating a national policy for media, aiming to tackle problems such as media overreach and failure to follow ethics.

Thus, having and upholding the Penal Code and ICCPR Act, along with punishing hate speech, will help prevent sudden violent incidents. However, such a prosecution must consider both the intent and the possibility of such speech causing prejudice, hostility, or violence (Gunatilleke, 2015).

Minor Matters, a national movement promoting freedom of religion in Sri Lanka, has introduced a smartphone game, 'Aiyo Alice', to educate young people about issues like hate speech, fake news, and prejudice (Samuel, 2020). The Android version of the video game '*Aiyo Alice*' in the 'Games for Social Change' category aims to instill togetherness and integrity in the cyber world. Aiyo Alice is available on the Google Play Store (MinorMatters, 2021).

Therefore, using the media to bolster religious coexistence and keeping an eye on false information about Muslims and other groups are extremely important.

Coordinated National Mechanism

Sri Lanka's various organizations aim to promote unity and coexistence among ethnic groups, but tensions persist, especially between Buddhists and Muslims. Religious leaders and community leaders play a crucial role, but resources, finances, and government obstacles limit their activities. They serve as agents of peace and protection against violence. According to a study conducted by Considine and Connolly (2018), the major problems in maintaining peace are a lack of funds or resources, followed by political or physical violence and threats to security (24%), government and structural impediments (18%), and religious intolerance (18%). Due to these obstacles, the activities are limited to only a few divisions and districts. Repeated activities minimize community impact. One respondent suggests a

coordinated National Mechanism with organizations and religious leaders to address concerns involving Muslims and non-Muslims, establishing an independent national organization with government assistance.

In a similar sense, Peiris (2019, p. 26) mentions a statement by M. B. N. Firthous Mawlawi of Katthankudy, saying,

“So we need a lot of interventions to bring inter-faith communities together for dialogue from the bottom to the top. We all have first to change within and then change communities through self-transformation and inter-faith dialogue by reaching out to others. Currently, a lot of religious leaders take part in inter-religious activities, but sometimes I wonder if their attitudes towards all communities have changed. Religious leaders are not ready to face challenges. When a crisis arises, they try to be in the safe zone without interfering, not ready to challenge politicians and extremist groups to address the crisis. Religious leaders themselves can do more for interfaith coexistence. Any incident disturbing the peace in our community or country should be condemned by religious leaders as a collective. And we should create a national level platform among religious leaders of all faiths for implementation of a road map for religious plurality.”

The majority of respondents feels the importance of a coordinated national mechanism; it should be planned and implemented by relevant stakeholders with the involvement of every citizen.

An Efficient Educational System

The education system plays a crucial role in a country's success, as it fosters tolerance and harmony. Promoting ethnic harmony through intercultural studies, multireligious understanding, and extracurricular activities can promote harmony in the country. In Sri Lanka, children attend Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, or Christian schools and are taught either in English, Sinhala, or Tamil. There were 6915 Sinhala schools, 2301 Tamil schools, and 939 Muslim schools in 2020 (Ministry of Education of Sri Lanka, 2020).

Schools should use a neutral method to teach each child the skills and knowledge useful in the wider community. Multicultural education is one of the most important components in the development of pluralist societies' knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Wedikandage, 2014).

Satarasinghe (2019) suggests that Singapore should be a model for promoting religious cohesion through education in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, Singapore has served as a model for multicultural studies by including religious harmony in formal academic subjects such as Civics, Moral Education, Social Studies, and History, as well as beyond classroom activities such as sports and enrichment programs (Ho, 2018; Tan, 2008). Additionally, to decrease religious differences, the curriculum was designed to remove references to historical or contemporary religious disputes; it avoided criticizing other religions to avoid insulting religious sensibilities, which creates inter-communal conflicts (Andy, 2020; Thio, 2006).

In this sense, some studies explain that textbooks used in the 1970s and 1980s up until 2017 in Sri Lanka contain practices of ethnic bias. Expand on that analysis. Tamils were portrayed in Sinhalese history textbooks as historical enemies of the Sinhalese, with those who fought against them lauded as patriots. Sinhalese Buddhists were portrayed as the only genuine Sri Lankans, with Tamils, Muslims, and Christians treated as insignificant outsiders and pushed to the periphery (Pieris, 2019; Bush & Saltarelli, 2000).

The Sri Lankan curriculum should promote tolerance and coexistence among all religions, focusing on history, civics, and religious studies. Schools should involve diverse ethnic students through visits, trips, and programs, and teachers and staff should receive training in multicultural education and psychological practice. Similarly, the findings of Warnasuriya's study (2019) reveal some interesting points, beginning with the fact that educational providers, in this case, teachers, content creators, and other academics, consider nation-building to be one of the primary goals of education, particularly when it comes to history teaching. Some users believe that nation-building involves making a Sri Lankan identity, however, others feel that it should also include teaching national pride and love to the country's youth.

In addition, several studies, including Nawastheen (2019), Jayasinghe and Ranasinghe (2019), Wettewa (2016), and Kulasekara et al. (2016) have been undertaken and analyzed, emphasizing the need to incorporate intercultural multireligious studies into the curriculum of Sri Lankan school education. Primarily, the national education system in Sri Lanka should be changed to

unite citizens. It should then ensure that young people are smart, skilled, and able to manage challenges in the outside world.

Creating Space for Dialogue

Space for dialogue will result in understanding between and within religious groups. As a result, different groups will grow confident, understanding, and tolerant of each other. Dialogue is often extremely helpful for overcoming conflicts and changing situations, as it surpasses other resolutions. Dialogue is a specific mode of communication at the basis of any relationship (UNDP, 2017). In relation to this Respondent 1 marked:

“I believe that we failed to recognize and care about the views of other faiths, religious people, and what they think about us.”

Misunderstandings and disputes arise from ineffective communication, leading to violence and a cycle of violence. Discourse, particularly religious dialogue, is crucial for understanding common aspirations and peacemaking (Coppola, 2004; Onaiyekan, 2024).

It emphasizes the significance of dialogue in society, urging its prioritization across various sectors. This workshop is open to religious leaders, decision-makers, children, youth, women, government workers, teachers, and rural residents. It suggests establishing village-based committees and designing programs based on people's positions. Activities like games, roundtable discussions, exhibitions, and artist events can facilitate reflection, communication, engagement, and idea expression. These forms provide an opportunity for thinking, learning, and even changing views toward one another. It can potentially create wonderful, transforming relationships (UNDP, 2017).

Problem-solving discussions are arranged in workshops for different parties and are moderated by people from outside the political world who have knowledge in the field. The results of the workshops are related to the real lives of people within the country, and they are introduced to those on a national level.

Authors suggest that by carrying out ‘Promoting Religious Harmony Project’ that was implemented by the Equitas - International Centre for

Human Rights Education, in collaboration with the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) (2016) between 2014-2016 in Ampara, Colombo, and Galle districts, coexistence can be encouraged across Sri Lanka. It focused on improving understanding among religious groups in Sri Lanka, promoting harmony, and supporting inter-religious reconciliation and highlighted the importance of forming bonds with people of all religions, promoting a more beautiful society, and a message for students.

If such efforts were carried out in every village, division, district, school, religious center, and worship venue, it would help promote religious harmony among all Sri Lankan people because dialogue encourages change.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka's religious diversity presents challenges to harmonious coexistence, including political exploitation, legal frameworks, media influence, weak communication, ineffective education, and financial resources. Addressing these barriers through educational reforms, interreligious dialogue, constitutional safeguards, media regulation, and national strategies can foster a more inclusive society. This study has the limitation of providing valuable insights into a specific aspect of religious coexistence, as it discusses the interview data from two prominent Islamic organizations without including representatives of other religions due to its specific aim and practical constraints, such as limited time and resources. Thus, future studies may involve broader interfaith representation.[w]

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